

Robert L. Jamieson

## He stood tall after Army dealt a blow



### HE'S 83 YEARS OLD

and has a slight frame, shy of 5-foot-5.

The weight he carried for 63 years, after being railroaded by the Army for a Seattle crime he always said he didn't commit, would have destroyed a lesser man. But that's not the way of Sam Snow, whose story offers a road map for how to move on after a crushing blow.

Snow was a footnote to last week's news -- the Army paved the way to overturn convictions of 28 black soldiers linked to a race riot and hanging of an Italian war prisoner at Fort Lawton in August 1944.

Snow was brought up on rioting charges even though he wasn't involved in the fracas.

After several months in lock-up, he was dishonorably discharged, which disqualified him from the GI Bill -- and a chance at college.

He was just 19 at the time, and Seattle was the only big city Snow, from a small, Southern town, had visited. After his ouster from the Army, Snow was hurt and ashamed, derailed from the path of his own father, who served during World War I.

He returned to his segregated hometown of Leesburg, Fla., poverty staring him in the face.

But this is what Snow did next:

He got work as a janitor, rising at 4 a.m. every day.

He took on odd jobs working in orange groves or with livestock under a fiery sun.

In his spare time he became the neighborhood handyman and never turned down a request.

He married his sweetheart, Margaret, and they had two sons and a daughter.

He buried that daughter, just 17, after she lost her fight with lupus. He buried his mother after an illness -- and his brother as well.

He took in his sister's son, who was mentally challenged and nurtured his potential.

He put his own sons through college on a blue-collar salary, and they went on to become teachers.

He built a home in Leesburg -- and built his brother one in the lot behind.

**"Stay patient. Stay humble. Don't be boastful. Take care of your family. And God will make a way."**

He became a pillar of his African Methodist Episcopal church, rising to become a lay president for the local district and galvanizing people to get humanitarian aid to the Third World.

As Snow went from teenager to father to grandfather, there was one thing he never did:

Bad-mouth the Army.

He did the opposite, actually, encouraging his grandchildren to sign up, Ray Snow Jr., a grandson, told me with a chuckle.

"Yes, I felt I had been served an injustice," Sam Snow said when we caught up this week. "But I

decided I wasn't going to hold a grievance against nobody."

He followed a life map of his own: "Stay patient. Stay humble. Don't be boastful. Take care of your family. And God will make a way."

He always told people God would find a way to shed truth on what happened long ago during his brief time in Seattle, where he was on a stopover before heading to war.

During the court-martial, he and the other soldiers had defense lawyers who weren't given enough time to interview them.

The prosecution, meanwhile, botched the identification of some men and held key documents the defense should have seen.

These -- and other injustices in the case -- would have been lost to history had Jack Hamann, a Seattle journalist, not written a powerful book, "On American Soil," that moved Uncle Sam to take another look.

"Wouldn't have made it without Jack," Snow told me. "He believed."

As did another man -- Howard Noyd of Bellevue.

Noyd, now 92, was one of just two defense lawyers who represented the original pool of more than 40 soldiers.

"We weren't given enough time even to interview all of the black defendants and do justice on their behalf," Noyd told me this week.

"We were not able to get the inspector general's report. The government was out to get the black troops punished in order to satisfy the Italian government."

Last week, the Army said that military prosecutors had used questionable tactics that undermined a fair trial.

In addition, Hamann says in his book, the Italian POW was likely lynched by a prejudiced white military police officer.

For Snow, whose life was shaped by two places - - Seattle, where fate struck in a bad way, and Leesburg, where he found his way -- a gross injustice has been made right.

He never planned to stop living even after being so wronged. He always believed a beautiful life was right there for the making. Amen.

*P-I columnist Robert L. Jamieson Jr. can be reached at 206-448-8125 or robertjamieson@seattlepi.com.*